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Wild Life on the Delta

Events

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River Arts Festival and Kinetic Art Cruz take over San Lorenzo Park

BY MAUREEN DAVIDSON

✓ **W**HEN I think of the river, I think of "wild"—a cool little piece of nature flowing from the mountains right through the center of town," says Bruce Van Allen, former Santa Cruz mayor and a 30-year activist for restoring the San Lorenzo River. This weekend, he says he'll be there to see the concepts of "wild," "river," "nature" and "town" woven together into one exhilarating work of art: a growing new festival that's rooted in Santa Cruz history and located right at its watery heart.

The River Arts Festival is the sum of many parts: Artists plus Musicians plus Environmentalists plus Schools plus Colorful Zany Pacific Avenue Participative Parade plus Vineyards plus Food plus Kinetic Art Contest plus Cash Prizes/Celebrity Judges plus Hands-on Artmaking plus the San Lorenzo River—multiplied by thousands of sunny locals and tourists and divided by absolutely nothing (it's free), and what you get is a perfect Santa Cruz festival: the River Arts Festival, this weekend at San Lorenzo Park.

The brainchild of Linda Levy and Lynn Guenther, artists deeply involved in education and community, the festival is designed to be a distinctively Santa Cruz event that not only benefits visual and performing artists but also the environment, local businesses and schools. Most of the proceeds



THE BEAT GOES ON Taiko drummers performing on the Duck Island Stage at San Lorenzo Park last year as part of the first River Arts Festival

are donated to fund arts programs in schools.

"I have been taking my work to festivals all over the country for a long time," says Guenther, a jeweler. "Every show I do there are so many Santa Cruz artists that the attendees notice it and we joke among ourselves that we see each other everywhere but here. For many years Santa Cruz had an art and wine festival downtown. It was great—right in the heart of the city. We wanted to develop an event of that quality again."

"About 40 years ago down in the benchlands around the county building there was a Spring Fair that brought artists and celebrants from all over,"

remembers Levy. "When Lynn began to talk about the need for a venue for regional artists to sell their work, I remembered the fair and how beautiful the riverbank is at this time of the year. I had been trying to come up with a really distinctive community event, and once we began to think of the river, it became the logical focus."

Reclaiming the Forgotten River

Over a century ago, the river was the site of a real humdinger of a distinctive event, the Venetian Water Carnival, which began in 1884 after a fire gutted Front Street businesses and city leaders wanted to draw people back downtown.

It was a lavish weeklong event, with elaborate floats, costume balls, parades, performances, an aquatic Olympics and cycling events: a huge community celebration.

The same spirit drives the River Arts Festival. The co-founders don't want to talk about all the hoops they leaped through in order to hold such an event in a park that for years was considered "wild" in a meaning very different from Van Allen's "wild" nature. After the river was dammed in the '50s and virtually hidden from view, the lush vegetation surrounding the waterway became an unregulated, difficult-to-police area that sheltered homeless and

COURTESY LINDA LEVY

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COURTESY OF THE SANTA CRUZ CITY-COUNTY LIBRARY SYSTEM



WATER WORLD Queen Anita's Barge and gondolas make their way up the San Lorenzo River during the June 1895 carnival.

criminal activities. But since the first River Arts Festival last year, San Lorenzo Park has become an increasingly active community space. With the recent completion of the riverway bike and strolling path that borders the park and connects the Boardwalk and beach area along the river, the number of walkers and cyclists and picnickers using the river and the park has passed the tipping point, reclaiming one of the city's most beautiful spaces for community use.

This weekend, the river is again the star of the show.

Medium and Message

From Front Street downtown, a pedestrian bridge brings visitors over the river and into the festival. The bridge is vibrant with 110 flapping flags made by students in Kathleen Croscetti's Mission Hill Middle School art class. They spent a semester on the 350 Project—"350 parts per million—the carbon footprint that the human population needs to achieve in order to sustain a livable planet," as Croscetti explains. "Each flag has something to do with 350—saving animal species, reducing energy use—it's a great topic for the festival entrance."

Once across the bridge, festivalgoers will find a landscape of artist booths, environmental exhibits, music stages and demonstration areas, and at key

locations throughout, temporary sculptural installations by invited artists. Croscetti is one of these. Others include works representing the Pajaro Valley's annual outdoor sculpture exhibit, "Sculpture Is," at the Sierra Azul Nursery, including the marvelous ceramic totems by Susanna Arias. At the eastern end of the park, Eike Waltz exhibits his most recent provocative proposal for the Seymour Bridge.

The 80 artists who exhibit and sell their work at the festival were selected from applicants from throughout the Western United States. A few artists long associated with the area return to Santa Cruz for this event, like Tom Killion, who captures the grandeur of the California coast in exquisite original woodblock prints in the Japanese tradition. Almost 80 percent of the artists are from Santa Cruz County. Ten of the artists will be demonstrating.

This year, two music stages run the gamut of styles from Baroque to boogie. Another new development is a wine garden featuring four local vineyards, some sophisticated food choices and an acoustic stage. On the other end of the park, food booths provide an array of edibles. Throughout the grounds there will be stiltwalkers and buskers, endless opportunities to participate in

art activities, many designed especially for kids and, on the riverway, scores of highly decorated bikes, skateboards and people-powered mobile sculptures by kids and artists and Kinetic Art aficionados from all over the West Coast.

The Power of Art

On Sunday morning, a freewheeling crowd takes over Pacific Avenue. Organizers expect an enthusiastic turnout for the second Kinetic Art Cruz, which invites the community to make people-powered art vehicles and join a parade down Pacific Avenue to the Park's Duck Island Stage, where cash prizes will be awarded by celebrity judges. Some elaborate Burning Man-type kinetic vehicles are expected, like that of bronze sculptor Sean Monaghan, the Clank Boom Clank group is coming from Santa Rosa and local businesses are participating with creations like the Octopus' Garden from the Staff of Life. Schools have been working on student vehicles based on bikes or skateboards. All day Saturday, Kinetic Art Cruz organizer Mia Duquet will work with the Creative Reuse organization to offer

assistance and materials for people who want to create their own art vehicle for the parade.

"Alternative transportation is so important to combat global warming," says the bike-power advocate. "Come down Saturday and let's turn your skateboard or bike into a work of art."

Bill Tysseling, executive director of the sponsor, the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce, is enthusiastic. "This town is an 'edge of thought' kind of place, known for creativity and risk-taking. The festival celebrates this creative energy as well as the physical elegance of our environment—an environment that Santa Cruz has valued and protected. The organizers have put together an event that brings all this together, I think it will grow to become part of the Santa Cruz identity."

THE RIVER ARTS FESTIVAL runs Saturday-Sunday, May 16-17, 11am-6pm at San Lorenzo Park in Santa Cruz.

THE KINETIC ART CRUZ happens Sunday, May 17, at 10am at the bus station parking lot on Pacific Avenue.



YOUNG AND ART A youthful connoisseur with one of Jeff Caplan's dragonfly sculptures

COURTESY LINDA LEVY